

WORSHIP

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More Than We Can Handle

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Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’ He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”’ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you,



no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Today is the fourth Sunday in the season we call Epiphany. In Epiphany we hear stories in the Scripture where people recognize the truth of who Jesus is. Today's passage is from Luke's gospel. Early on in his ministry, Jesus has come home to Nazareth where he's been invited by the Session of the Synagogue to be the guest preacher. Listen with me for the word of the Lord.

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Whenever I read about this experience of Jesus preaching in his hometown synagogue I have so many questions.

Like how, exactly, does Jesus "pass through the midst of them" and go on his way? That is pretty slick.

I wonder how many of Jesus' friends were in the synagogue that day, and what they must have been thinking about this boy they'd seen as a child who was now up to big things?

I wonder what Jesus was feeling – what it was like for him to come back to his hometown and hear all the things that people say ("I remember you when you were this tall!")?

But my biggest question about this story is what made the people so angry? Whatever it was, it must have been significant.

One minute they were dotting on Mary and Joseph's boy – "speaking well of him" and "amazed at the gracious words coming from his mouth" – and in a blink of an eye they turned into an angry mob...frothing at the mouth and ready to hurl Jesus off the cliff.



Wow!

Angry people make me uncomfortable. I'm more of a harmony type of guy. So when I bump into people who are angry, I tend to try to diagnose the source of the anger and then try to find a solution to make it go away. I have an urge to find out the cause for people's anger or frustration. I look for the trigger. What was said or done that caused the person to react so strongly and negatively?

Sometimes those things are obvious.

After 17 years of marriage, I have found that there are some things that I do that will predictably trigger a negative response from my wife. Forgetting to tell her about an evening meeting or an out-of-town trip, walking by a basket of clean laundry that has needed folding for four straight days...that is a sure-fire recipe for an angry bride. It is simply cause and effect – and by now I should know better.

Other times, though, it is not so obvious why people get angry. With a 12-year old, I am the trailhead of having children who are teenagers. And there is a lot joy that comes with that reality. But good golly...sometimes I don't have the first clue what sets him off. And to make matters more confusing, the list of things that set him off changes day-to-day.

When it's your job to stand in a pulpit and talk for around 20 minutes a week there are, inevitably, times when you make people angry. Sometimes I know that a sermon will step on some toes and yield me some emails and letters from people who are unhappy and who disagree with my interpretation of the Scripture. Other times, I am quite surprised by what makes people when I see people come out of church with a furrowed brow.

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There wasn't a pulpit in the synagogue in Nazareth. After reading the Scripture, as was the tradition, Jesus sat down to teach. But it was soon obvious that he knew what he was doing when got the congregation riled up. Jesus had decided to push their buttons on purpose.

Things were going pretty well until Jesus mentioned Elijah visiting a widow at Zarephath at Sidon. It was at that point that you could feel temperature go up in the room.



A reference to a widow at Zarephath might not be a familiar story to us, but it was to those at the synagogue that day.

That story was an example of how God – using Elijah as a prophet – intentionally reached beyond Israel...beyond the boundaries of who were considered to be God's covenant people...to a place called Sidon...across the border – during a time when the people of Israel were really yearning for some sign of God's presence.

But God didn't come to them. God reached beyond them.

When Jesus referenced this story about Elijah, it made for one of those uncomfortable silences that occur whenever the preacher touches a nerve.

Backs straightened up.

Eyebrows were raised.

Some people cleared their throats.

Those gathered in the synagogue that day were upset because they had a strong identity as a tribe. The world beyond them may have been big and diverse and complicated, but within their borders, within their boundaries, within their nation they were the majority culture...and they didn't like being reminded of the fact that God was interested in more than just them...or worse, that God had chosen to show preference to a group outside of their ranks.

Jesus knew the crowd. They were his people. And in his homecoming sermon he chose to poke the bear.

It worked.

And then he did it again.

After referencing that story about Elijah, he reminded them of a story about Elisha. During a time that there were people suffering from leprosy in Israel who needed healing (God's own people), Elisha took his prophetic powers and tended to a Syrian called Naaman. Not only was Naaman an outsider, but he was a commander in the army of one of Israel's sworn enemies.

Jesus' message to his hometown crowd was clear: they may have heard about the amazing things Jesus was doing – teaching, healing, illustrating what



things were going to look like under the reign of God. But the object of that work was not limited to or owned by the majority culture of Jesus' tribe. No, Jesus wanted to make clear that his ministry was meant to go broader – to encompass more – to be more widely shared – and maybe, even, privilege those who had been in the majority less...because that is what happens when the focus isn't just on one group (or one tribe), but on the whole.

And that is what was the source of their anger.

Because the people in the synagogue in Nazareth didn't like the idea of having to share a savior. They wanted to keep him to themselves. For their benefit. For their sake. To lead them into a future they had imagined – not one that shared the expectations and the needs of other people.

When they realized the implications of what Jesus was telling them, it wasn't just that they were upset. No, they were ready to take action. If Jesus wasn't only going to be about their benefit, they didn't want him to benefit anyone...so they made ready to throw him off a cliff.

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I still don't know how he pulled off his nifty move to pass through midst of the crowd after his sermon was over (I guess divinity has its privileges), but it sure doesn't seem like Jesus was surprised by their reaction.

Those in the synagogue behaved the way most people in the majority do when we perceive a threat to our most-favored status – they lashed out.

They tried to make an example out of someone.

They flexed their muscle.

They exercised their power.

The reason?

They weren't ready to accept the version of the world that Jesus came to embrace and save.

They wanted a smaller, simpler version where they were still at the center.

It's amazing how the Word of God stands up over all these years and still speaks to us, isn't it?



Next year marks a watershed moment in that none of the babies that we baptize in our church will belong to a majority race or ethnicity – no matter what race or ethnicity they are. According to US Census projections and a report from the Brookings Institute, 2020 will be the first year in our nation’s history that more than half of the children born will be a part of minority race or ethnic group. Demographers predict that as those babies grow up, by the year 2044 the total population of the United States will reflect this reality. In other words, the “melting pot” will be fully cooked – where no one group will be able to claim they are the majority.

This is, of course, a change that has been building. One of the obvious things I think we have learned as we move closer to this new reality is that it can be a challenge to share the future – especially when the future is not only a reflection of the hopes and the values of a majority – but when it encompasses the dreams and needs of the whole.

There are big implications for how we live together and make decisions together and respect one another in that future that we will share – a future that will soon be here for those we will baptize at this font.

But for today, the question our Scripture brings to my mind is how does sharing that future make us feel?

Is it threatening?

Is it comforting?

Is it confusing?

And why?

What is at stake for us when we think about sharing the future with those outside our circle, our boundaries, our tribe?

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Believe it or not, I have a good deal of empathy for those folks who gathered in the Nazareth synagogue to hear Jesus preach. Because I understand what it feels like to suddenly realize that you are not as much in the center of things as you thought you once were. It doesn’t always come as good news...initially.

I don’t think the crowd in handled their feelings very well.



But I think I get what was driving their anger.

And I appreciate the fact that Jesus didn't reciprocate.

I appreciate that Jesus was gentle with his home crowd.

That he passed on through – and went about his ministry – that he kept sharing his vision about that ever-encompassing future – and then gave his life for it.

That he gave his life for those outside the fold, beyond the boundaries, for those who were unlikely to be included, and...for the people in his hometown... who had a hard time with the change that Jesus' ministry represented.

Because Jesus gave his life for them, too.

If they had let him stick around and preach another sermon on another day, I wonder what Jesus would have said? He knew the people – their fears, their hopes, their dreams. I wonder if he would have acknowledged that – yes – thinking about the future does overwhelm, because there are things we don't know, there are things we can't control, there are changes we can't imagine. And yet – that future belongs to God...as do we.

Perhaps Jesus would have unrolled the scroll of the Scripture and read from the Psalms:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me...

You know when I sit down and when I rise up...

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me...

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is so high that I cannot attain it...

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Let us pray: O Lord, we give you thanks that you are behind and before...that you are in charge of our future. And so we yield ourselves to you – setting aside our fears – because we trust that you are faithful. And that your promises will bring abundant life. Amen.

